

Religious leaders unite to demand federal government help poor kids [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 May 2001

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Child poverty in the midst of record federal surpluses: more than 400 religious leaders say it's a shameful crisis that they're joining forces to fight.

The signatures of church heads from at least 17 different faiths appear in a two-page ad Thursday in the Globe and Mail's national edition. It calls on the federal Liberals to devote more from Ottawa's swollen coffers to help about 1.3 million kids, or one in five, who live in poverty.

Finance Minister Paul Martin announced last week a record surplus of at least \$15 billion, but it will be used to cut the national debt to \$550 billion.

"The federal government has a surplus and yet children are going hungry," said Rev. Susan Eagle, a United Church minister who works with low-income families in London, Ont.

"It's really, truly shocking when you look at how well off the country is....I view it as an injustice. It's certainly a corporate sin, (and) it's a community sin if we don't address it."

The ad is billed as an unprecedented convergence of multi-denominational leaders working together for a common cause.

"We're dealing not just with the economic aspects of poverty," said Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld of the Temple Emanu-El in Toronto. "But also with the social impacts, the question of justice, of being able to develop the special talents and skills which are essential to create wealth in a global society."

A \$40,000 donation from Scotiabank helped pay for the ad, which cost about \$50,000. Individual donations covered the rest, said Bielfeld.

Church leaders have grown impatient since 1989 when members of Parliament vowed to wipe out child poverty within 10 years. Today, the number of poor children has instead grown by 400,000, they say.

The federal government recently pledged \$2.2 billion over five years for early childhood education programs, and will spend another \$2.5 billion this year on the National Child Benefit to help working poor parents.

Church leaders are calling for a commitment of \$16 billion over five years for child care services, affordable housing and other programs.

"I think governments have put a significant amount of resources into this area already... and we're starting to see the proportion of families who are low-income come down," said Marta Morgan, acting director general of social policy at Human Resources Development Canada. "Hopefully, we'll continue to see improvements."

Provinces are to start reporting next fall how they've spent federal investments for children, Morgan added. Results will be reported one year later.

"As those reports come out, governments will be in position to see what more is needed," Morgan said.

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